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Hot Topic Lecture

01 MIND ANTIBODIES AND CNS INVOLVEMENT IN SLE: DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSES

Harald Prüss. *German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases (DZNE), Berlin and Department of Neurology and Experimental Neurology, Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Germany*

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Central nervous system involvement in systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) is a highly important aspect of the disease that is not well understood. It involves several components of the immune system possibly related to certain conditions within the specialised brain compartment.

Important differential diagnoses include the growing spectrum of autoimmune encephalitides. Here, autoimmune mechanisms causing dysfunction of the brain are increasingly recognised and brought about a paradigm shift in neurology and psychiatry. Identification of numerous pathogenic autoantibodies against neuronal tissue resulted in unprecedented diagnostic and therapeutic opportunities. Current clinical and experimental data show that diverse neuropsychiatric abnormalities may be the sole symptoms of brain autoimmunity. Affected patients are at risk that such treatable etiologies are overlooked as rheumatic or psychiatric disorders. In some patients the diagnosis can be made by detection of specific auto-antibodies directed against neuronal or glial surface proteins. These epitopes include voltage-gated potassium channels or glutamate receptors, but also novel antigens not yet tested for autoimmunity, such as cell adhesion molecules or enzymes. The identification and recombinant production of disease-defining human monoclonal autoantibodies from these patients now allow detailed analyses of the pathogenic effects, of signaling cascades leading to neuropsychiatric symptoms and potential triggers of autoimmunity. It has become clear that the perpetual discovery of novel antibodies will continue and ultimately result in a better understanding of pathological mechanisms and therapies in patients with impairment of memory, cognition, affect and mood.

Learning objectives
- Understand important neuropsychiatric differential diagnoses of lupus, in particular autoimmune encephalitis and psychosis
- Review the role of anti–neuronal autoantibodies in autoimmune brain diseases
- Discuss why immediate immunotherapy is important for neuropsychiatric CNS symptoms

Roundtable: Treatment Challenges

01 WHEN AND HOW TO ESCALATE THERAPY IN AN IMPENDING FLARE

Bevra Hahn. *University of California, Los Angeles, USA*

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Twenty to thirty percent of patients with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) patients experience a disease flare each year. Official definitions are available: The most used are based on physician decisions to change treatment; if treatment is added or escalated, that defines flare. Much research has focused on detecting flares before symptoms occur. The most effective and available is a decline in serum complement levels (C3 or C4), which often precedes symptoms; a recent study showed falling complement has a positive predictive value of 0.74 (very good) and a negative predictive value of 0.90 (excellent).[1] Other biomarkers include rising titers of anti-dsDNA, falling platelet counts and for nephritis increase in proteinuria and appearance of red blood cells in the urine. Other blood markers, less available but probably better, include increased proportions of activated monocytes and naïve B cells, increases in levels of serum cytokine/chemokines ICAM-1 and IP-10, and increased numbers of RBC, platelets or B cells binding the complement split product, C4d. Several urinary biomarkers are likely to predict flares of nephritis, including MCP, NGAL and TWEAK, but these are not consistent across studies. As soon as symptoms of flare begin, the patient saying s/he is flaring is the best sign and is usually accompanied by changes in the laboratory values associated with that individual, such as falling platelet, WBC or RBC counts, increase in proteinuria, rising erythrocyte sedimentation rate, etc. Prevention of flare is a major goal of therapy and the effective treatments that induce improvement also reduce flare rates, including hydroxychloroquine, glucocorticoids, cyclophosphamide, mycophenolate, azathioprine, belimumab, rituximab, and calcineurin inhibitors.

The physician must also rule out other causes of the 'flare' that are NOT SLE. In my experience, fever in an SLE patient is more often a sign of infection than of lupus flare (presence of shaking chills and of very high levels of C-reactive protein are more likely in infection); the urinary tract is the most common source of infection, followed by upper respiratory tract infection and pneumonia, septicemia is also common.[2 3] Appropriate cultures should be obtained before escalating immunosuppression. Risk of infection will be lower if the patient has received all appropriate immunisations and is taking preventive medications while immunosuppressed. Similarly, ischemia of heart, brain, gastrointestinal tract can result from clotting with or without vasculitis, and you may consider anticoagulation while evaluating for active SLE. Serositis can result from uremia. When the physician decides SLE is flaring there are several approaches that suppress flare; probably the quickest is to give an intramuscular dose of long-acting glucocorticoid, such as 40–80 mg of triamcinolone acetonide or 20–40 mg of methylprednisolone acetate, which usually suppresses flare and lasts 2–4 weeks. If flare recurs, increase the daily glucocorticoid dose (patients often do this themselves – before consulting the physician). If there is still disease activity and you cannot taper prednisolone/prednisone to less than 10 mg